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The Gentlemen and the Roughts: Violence, Honor and Manhood in the Union Army

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Review

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Foote, Lorien *The Gentlemen and the Roughts: Violence, Honor and Manhood in the Union Army*. New York University Press, \$39.00 ISBN 978-0-8147-2790-4

A Gendered Look at the Union Army

The varied nature of the Northern population during the Civil War guaranteed that a diverse cross-section of Americans entered the Union Army. Past historical studies have revealed the differences between eastern and western soldiers, urban and rural backgrounds, nativists and immigrants, and those on either side of a wide range of political divides. Lorien Foote, in her book *The Gentlemen and the Roughts*, sheds some light on the previously overlooked conflict between educated and refined officers (the ‘gentlemen’) and the frequently crude and uneducated men (the ‘roughts’) under their command. Foote describes an army with deep philosophical divisions as gentlemen, convinced of the righteousness of their behavioral mode and fearful that army life would taint their belief system, sought to delineate themselves from the unrestrained and impulsive roughs that filled the ranks. The roughs symbolized all the characteristics that caused the gentlemen to shudder, ranging from moral degeneracy to wanton violence. Called upon to lead the roughs, Foote describes how the gentlemen strove to lead the army by example and by force to emulate gentlemanly behavior or least to restrain the worst of their behaviors.

Foote begins by defining what constituted a gentleman and how they promoted that definition. Those who identified themselves as the leading class concurred with the idea that personal discipline, a cornerstone of gentility in civilian life, certainly had a place in army life as well. Gentlemen established their presence in the army by transferring the civilian definitions of morality to their new military setting and pursuing a standard of behavior and refinement familiar to their prewar expectations. By encouraging or forcing their men to meet their standards, gentlemen hoped to protect their worldview while uplifting

the morals of the roughs. Officers cracked down on vice, promoted religion in camp, and forced high standards of personal hygiene on their men in the hopes of shaping the roughs into effective soldiers. To reinforce their point, gentlemen-officers used the full range of disciplinary measures to correct the behavior of the roughs-soldiers. The Army's disciplinary system, as codified in the Articles of War, gave officers wide latitude to punish soldiers for behavioral offenses as much as military offenses. Short of formal courts-martial, officers enjoyed the prerogative to correct the conduct of enlisted men, including direct violence (such as striking soldiers with the flat edge of their swords) or even summarily shooting offenders, often with the approval of their peers.

Foote further demonstrates that, once engaged in battle, the gentlemen fought in their own particular mode separate from the aggressive roughs. Even in the thickest of fights, gentlemen struck a delicate balance between behaviors that were too soft or too hard. Demonstrations of gentility on the battlefield were not measured by violence, rage, and bloodlust, because those were the attributes of the roughs. Instead, gentlemen were to show behaviors of a more restrained sort. Gentility on the battlefield came from exhibiting moral judgment and generosity, concepts seemingly out of place on a battlefield littered with the dead and dying. Gentlemen also expected their peers to display the proper martial spirit by being 'cool' in the midst of battle. Truly refined officers, they believed, were not only visibly brave on the battlefield, but also dispassionate and unmoved by events around them. Becoming excited or energetic reflected a loss of composure and self-control, and was such an unmasculine trait that an officer who lost such equanimity was said to have become 'unmanned.'

Because gentlemen valued their honor so highly, they could not suffer insults to their honor lightly. Seeing little difference between their military and civilian existence, even volunteer officers would not permit a slight from another officer to follow them into civilian life after the war. Consequently, dueling, a practice normally associated with honor-obsessed antebellum Southerners, became a means to settle matters between gentlemen involved in disputes. Foote's description of dueling among Union officers is a fascinating description of the inherent contradiction of gentlemen shooting out their differences. Using violence to settle disputes defies their adherence to education and logic, while using violent means to achieve an end seems more like the emotional impulsiveness of a rough rather than a gentleman. Gentlemen officers pressed their enlisted roughs to obey the rules, but the Articles of War expressly forbade officers from even taking actions to provoke a challenge to duel, much less

actually conducting a duel itself. The proscribed punishment for invoking a duel was a dishonorable discharge, the ultimate sign of failure for a status-conscious officer. Foote reveals, however, that the loss of face by ignoring a challenge to duel or an insult that deserved a challenge was more damaging than fighting the duel itself. Although not commonplace, sufficient examples of officers settling affairs with firearms exist to prove that public displays of honor included fighting fellow officers as well as the Confederates.

Foote concludes the study with an examination of how enlisted men viewed their gentlemen-officers. Some privates, who considered themselves gentlemen, found the officers' disregard for their status as haughty and undeserved. Puncturing the image of officers improving the culture of the roughs, enlisted men denigrated officers who 'put on airs' and behaved in a manner that defied their status or exceeded their authority. Soldiers resented officers whose pomposity led to excessive discipline, especially when soldiers felt aggrieved. Accustomed to the freedoms of civilian life, enlisted men resisted the lessons of their gentleman-officers, instead deflating their purported superiority at every turn. A good example included Foote's description of soldiers challenging their officers to take off their shoulder straps and fight them, asserting that only their insignia, and not their breeding, made them superior officers.

Foote's use of primary sources is thorough and extensive. Her use of regimental order books is especially useful as the orders found within reflect the individualistic leadership style of the unit's senior officers in their efforts to shape the behavior of their men beyond the standard Articles of War. Her writing style is clear and concise, and her dissection of the nuances of the examples cited in the book is very informative. Gender studies is a relatively new aspect of Civil War research, but *The Gentlemen and the Roughs* is a fine example of how this new field can expand our knowledge of Civil War participants.

Steven Ramold, an Associate Professor at Eastern Michigan University, is the author of *Slaves, Sailors, Citizens: African Americans in the Union Navy and Baring the Iron Hand: Discipline in the Union Army. He is currently preparing a manuscript on military-civilian relations in the North during the Civil War.*